



Technical Brief  
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Virginia Main Street

**MONITOR**



*A new mural in Uptown Martinsville reinterprets a 1920 circus parade on the courthouse square.*

## The art of downtown Revitalization with an arts-and-culture approach

Traditional business districts have always been more than a place to do business. They are community gathering places, centers of education and entertainment, and ground zero for the shifts in the artistic and cultural activities that define a community. Reminiscences of their past heydays typically focus on sidewalks crowded with Saturday night movie goers more than they do the purchase of basic goods.

It's only natural then that a revitalization program would include significant investment in attracting consumers of entertainment, artistic, and cultural amenities. But there may be some misunderstanding about how to best go about it. Incorporating an Arts and Culture component in downtown revitalization requires a unique strategy for your one-of-a-kind community. Yet, while the point of this is to use your own assets to make community successful, there are some general best practices to consider.

### **1. Build up from existing investments and efforts**

Many high-profile downtown cultural investments follow the model of the architecturally significant performance space or museum that serves as a regional asset and tourism destination. But that's just one approach, and few communities currently have the resources to successfully pull it off.

Another strategy coordinates smaller, strategic investments in existing assets. These might include a rethinking of under-programmed venues already in place and a strengthening of the social network of arts and cultural organizations already at work in a community.

This building-up from resources already in place fits well with the Main Street approach, one that's both community- and reinvestment-driven. Take an inventory of your cultural and arts assets. Then identify a critical mass of thematically linked resources and market them collectively to create a seemingly much larger attraction with greater pull.

For instance, one gallery and coffee house isn't enough. But expanding from that point, a collective of interested stakeholders might identify the events produced by local arts organizations, retail that complements existing galleries, restaurants willing to turn their walls into art spaces, and other nonprofit and for-profit ventures that support and foster a vibrant cultural life. The more stakeholders a community involves in the inventory, the deeper and richer the outcome; the conversations themselves might spark new collaborations.

## Downtown Virginia's newest tool: The arts and cultural district

With the February 2009 passing of Virginia House Bill 1735, every community in Virginia became entitled to create an arts and cultural district. These are special business development and tourism areas designed to build community and create jobs.

The designation brings the locality the authority to grant tax incentives and pursue strategic regulation to foster arts- and culture-related business. For instance, a community can reduce permitting and user fees to speed progress for businesses that meet a specific profile. And a district can be rezoned to encourage a shift in use, such as from industrial to mixed use district to accommodate live-work spaces for artists. Admissions taxes can be exempted at venues within the district, and business license taxes

can be waived. As with any fiscal policy, impacts on revenue should be modeled and considered carefully.

The arts and culture districts have the potential to be a flexible and powerful tool at the hands of community leaders. When pursued as part of a strategic and comprehensive vision, a community can use it to improve and enhance existing assets.

To begin local discussion on how the powers of a potential district can be used, try convening arts and culture organizations and entrepreneurs to identify the existing challenges and barriers to their work. Wrap in other stakeholders, including tourism and community development leaders to begin identifying potential solutions—and those solutions might not involve any fiscal policy at all.

For instance, Richmond's First Fridays Artwalk creates an after-hours vibrancy along the Broad Street corridor of galleries once a month

by encouraging visitors to enjoy exhibition openings and free food. But the venues are currently hampered by occupancy restrictions. While still maintaining an eye for safety, one solution being explored is using the district to legally provide an exemption for businesses during the special events.

Other Virginia communities currently developing arts and cultural districts include Alexandria, Charlottesville, Falls Church, Harrisonburg, Manassas, Petersburg, and Winchester and the Towns of Blacksburg and Chincoteague. With the expansive legislation many more are in the exploratory phases, including at least 7 more designated Main Street communities. The structure and benefits will vary by community, and a knowledge sharing network is building among them. For more information visit the blog Building Arts and Cultural Districts at: [www.vaartsandculture.blogspot.com/](http://www.vaartsandculture.blogspot.com/).

## 2. Accentuate the authentic

Building from existing assets also helps to ensure that an arts and culture strategy is authentically "of the community." Arts strategies needn't require importing a symphony or building a fine arts museum. With Virginia's impressive historical assets and strong market position in heritage tourism, most communities already have a deep cultural and arts heritage to build from.

There are many decorative and folk art traditions alive in Virginia communities. Storytelling, the making of music and musical instruments, and the hand rendering of originally designed craft objects all reach into the past and carry forward specific qualities and characteristics based on place. Solid strategies celebrate unique, local characteristics while expanding options for residents and visitors to learn about, participate in, and enjoy them.

Architectural heritage is a natural element to weave into the mix. In Virginia's tobacco heyday, a prizery was a building where tobacco was "prized," or pressed in layers into hogshead barrels. Today in South Boston, new life

has been given to the most prominent structure in the historic warehouse district by bringing together visual and performing arts with an emphasis on fostering local artistic and cultural efforts as a community development strategy. For more information on The Prizery visit: [www.prizery.com](http://www.prizery.com).



Renovation on South Boston's 38,000 square foot Prizery began in 2002

### 3. DIY: Foster producers as well as consumers

A lively arts and cultural strategy can bring people downtown to listen to a concert or view an exhibit, and much, much more. If related partners work to engage residents and visitors in the production as well as the consumption side of the equation, the strategy shifts from just getting people in to see an expensive production to becoming part of producing the art itself. This can be a very inexpensive process. Classes and hands-on learning strengthen the base of appreciation for a craft or art technique. And it's part of a well-structured strategy to increase the public art, performance or gallery offerings over the long run. You can build a creative environment that hums with activity.

One strategy at work this year in the DHCD affiliate community of Galax was the *Drop, Shop, and Create* event, in which downtown shoppers left children in care of the Chestnut Creek School of the Arts. Staff and volunteers taught hands-on short courses in heritage holiday craft projects. Shopping became a little more convenient, and the school gave a trial-sized sample of its educational product.

In Martinsville, the collective of community development and arts interests are working to connect residents to the furniture-making heritage of the region through a series of "Build a Chair" workshops in which participants build a child's chair and learn about an emerging cultural heritage strategy. This do-it-yourself project complements the installation of 'The Big Chair', a new Uptown cultural marker honoring the region's tradition of craftsmanship.



Uptown Martinsville's "Big Chair" highlights the furniture-making heritage of Martinsville-Henry County and creates a new public space.

### 4. Identify and meet community needs

Incorporate the work of arts and cultural organizations in response to ongoing community needs. With school budget shortfalls, engaging nonprofit arts and culture participation in schools is a smart way to bolster the educational experience for a community's youth. It also helps build the appreciation for, and participation in, artistic and cultural experiences.

Some ideas: Intergenerational afterschool programs can transfer knowledge and meet the needs of seniors and young people in the community. For the promotion of their annual Centerfest event, Bedford Main Street holds a design competition with the local high school to let a student design the event t-shirt. On the design side of the Main Street strategy, fill the display windows left empty and wanting by vacancies; broker their use for the display of cultural or historical displays; or promote the work by local artists.

In Roanoke, one of the first public art projects funded under that city's new Percent for Art Program involved hiring an artist to work with students at the two city high schools to design bus shelters. The project was jointly funded by the City of Roanoke and through a federal grant received by the Greater Roanoke Valley Transit Authority. The students gained valuable design experience from a "working artist" and developed presentation skills. They experienced a public art project in all its phases, including required presentations to both the school board and city council.



Luray uses an artistic approach to temporarily screen vacant storefronts.

## 5. Cross pollinate for a new approach

While a community may not identify itself as having one unique asset, the combination of assets in a place can produce something truly unusual. Arts collectives, exchanges, and collaborative approaches to communicating a community's heritage can help to weave a unique place-based strategy. A brainstorming session bringing together the historical society and visual and performing arts groups can create innovative interpretations that communicate the local culture in engaging ways.

A partnership between Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance, the Harrisonburg Rockingham Historical Society, and Harrisonburg tourism produced an attractively designed and printed guide to historical structures in the city. Docent-guided tours are available on specific themes and places that might not be readily apparent to visitors, including the Blackrun Stream, the Woodbine Cemetery, historic churches, and a special Haunted Harrisonburg tour. For more information visit: <http://www.harrisonburgtourism.com/v.php?pg=31>.



Eddie Bumbaugh of Harrisonburg Downtown Renaissance leads a downtown tour for participants of the Virginia Main Street 2009 Spring Feature.

## 6. Take it to the streets

Release the arts and culture from institutions. While local museums and concert halls are important assets, they shouldn't be the only place that your community showcases its assets. By engaging people in unexpected places, such as on the street, in shops, or on the courthouse square, you infuse downtown with a dynamic, happening atmosphere. Encourage street performers. Have a theater group promote an upcoming musical by breaking into song in the middle of a shopping day, host a plein air painting group (literally "open air" or artists who paint out of doors and on-location) at the farmers' market, or encourage a quilting circle to try a quilting day in a public space.

### One step at a time: History for stumbling upon

Communities can mark special events and places in ways that let visitors stumble upon them, embedding the cultural character into the landscape. The Smyth County Town of Marion shares its history and unique assets with visitors through nicely produced stone pavers embedded in the streetscape. Without having to enter a museum or seek it out, downtown strollers can discover facts about the place.



The markers along downtown Marion's History Walk connect visitors and residents to the town's historical and cultural assets, including information on author Sherwood Anderson who once owned and wrote for the town's newspapers, and the soft drink Mountain Dew, the taste of which was formulated there.

A temporary project in Abingdon dotted Main Street with 27 fiberglass wolves custom-decorated by local artists. While similar projects have been undertaken in many communities across the country, Advance Abingdon chose an underdeveloped historical asset as a reference point. The community, once known as Wolf Hills, was given the name after Daniel Boone's dogs were attacked by wolves near the cave that sits below The Cave House, home today of the Holston Mountain Arts and Crafts Co-Operative. While the community's many tourists can't currently visit the cave, the temporary installation uses a little whimsy to draw attention to the colorful and historic tale.



*The painted wolf in front of Abingdon's Cave House looks at home in a faux quilted cover.*

## 7. Engage the senses

Think about your community as a sensory experience. As visitors and residents explore downtown, what do they see, hear, feel, smell, and taste? How does it communicate the artistic and cultural identity of a town? Public art can help call attention to important public places and histories. It can visually screen or improve less attractive infrastructure elements.

Across the country, electrical boxes have been painted like fields of flowers, garbage trucks have been wrapped like dinosaurs, and manhole covers relay the community brand.

Church bells, street musicians, and the sound of a water feature can add to a sense of place; even the noontime testing of the firehouse siren can be an important aural marking. What's the sound mark of your town?

Kids (and adults) love to touch things. And while many downtown stores are hands off inside, there might be hands-on, child friendly features outside. For instance, a little creativity can turn a staid statue into a lively legend. Encouraging people to engage with a statue (maybe rub a foot for safe travels) can cause residents and visitors alike to learn more about the person commemorated and might infuse a bit of local history or mythology into the streetscape.

Smell might seem a tougher arts-and-culture sell, but a local bakery or a good old fashioned BBQ joint is a great resource for any Virginia downtown. Building a little gathering tradition around the best-smelling time of day, such as when bread is baking—especially if it's a food that's specific to your community, or the ethnic heritage of the people—can engage this sometimes forgotten sense.

Taste is an easy one. Farmer's markets, local restaurants and festivals play a major part in bringing people downtown. With the growth in popularity of artisan and locally grown food, it's a natural strategy for your downtown to create its own sense of taste.

Finally, engage residents and visitors' sense of humor. For example, Berryville's whimsical Parking Meters on Parade turns a run-of-the-mill seasonal bagging of parking meters into a decorating contest and browsing opportunity for seasonal shoppers.



*Artscape, Old Town Winchester's arts banner project, draws brings additional color to the commercial district while drawing attention to its creative community of artists.*

## The mural of the story

Outdoor murals are one specific arts-based strategy that can refer to the historical and cultural context of a community while presenting a creative front to visitors. They can range from the conservation of faded advertising images to newly commissioned pieces that engage residents with professional artists, but all of them help to tell a story.

The City of Radford has taken advantage of existing layers of history on the sides of buildings to lend an authentic character to both the farmer's market parking lot and a small pocket park across the street.

Murals have become an integral part of the revitalization strategy, in Danville, Luray, and a host of other Virginia downtowns, adding to the sense of place and boosting community pride. Danville's Old 97 train mural pays tribute to the 1903 wreck at nearby Stillhouse Trestle. The transportation theme continued in the commission of the community's second mural, which features a 1920's scene complete with streetcar, an automobile, and familiar faces of contemporary and past residents, all sponsored by a \$500 donation to the project. For more information visit: <http://www.danville-va.gov>.

*In 2008, Tazewell County artist Ellen Elmes refurbished her 1984 mural in Richlands, a DHCD Affiliate Community. It follows that communities with murals soon get into the public art maintenance business. If possible, build conservation money into funding for public art projects from the start.*



## Leading a successful public art project

Incorporating art in public spaces can be a tricky process, but it is being done successfully in communities across the commonwealth.

Martinsville Uptown Revitalization Association (MURA) partnered with Piedmont Arts Association to pay tribute to agricultural life in the Martinsville-Henry County region with a mural at their farmer's market. While a professional artist created the composite portrait of local farms and growers, high school students also took part, creating add-on panels in the style of the artist.

Piedmont Arts Association's Tina Sell provided The Monitor with seven tips on getting a public art effort in place.

**1. Form a planning committee** – Build from essential community partnerships and stakeholders, including the local government, and its architectural review board, downtown organizations, youth leadership and service organizations, property owners or someone connected to them, local artists, someone connected to the additional funders funder, the local tourism organization and the chamber of commerce.

**2. Determine funding sources** – Develop a potential list of funders based on organizational goals. Consider the project's themes and location, and explore their potential well in advance of the project.

**3. Determine location** – Consider gateways, areas in need of enhancement, existing murals, walking tours, and property owners. Don't forget to consider existing planned improvements and ways the project might be incorporated into them to maximize opportunity and reduce cost and disruption.

**4. Research regulations** – Be sure to research the kinds of permits required, if the design ordinance applies, or if there might be a separate art-related ordinance in place.

**5. Select or vet the mural artist** – Public funding should require a public vetting process, as does any project on public property. Even in projects on private property in important downtown areas, the purpose of the mural and its impacts should be communicated to the public. If it's desired that the artist engage the community in the creation of the mural, screen for that ability and build it into the contract.

**6. Choose the right materials** – On painted projects, use long-lasting, outdoor, high-pigment paint to protect from ultraviolet exposure. For mural projects, consider using panels which can be removed and placed in a gallery one day if needed.

**7. Celebrate.** Recognize sponsors, major players and volunteers. Provide a public dedication event. Connect the public with the artist if it hasn't already been done, and include the project on a walking tour or other promotion.

For more information visit: [www.piedmontarts.org](http://www.piedmontarts.org) and [www.martinsvilleuptown.com](http://www.martinsvilleuptown.com).

## 8. Encourage entrepreneurs

It seems like a big leap from amateur to professional, but most communities are full of people pursuing a craft. These artistic endeavors can range from two and three dimensional artwork and more utilitarian woodwork to basket weaving, quilting and the canning of seasonal vegetables.

None of them require formal training to produce products for the marketplace. In fact, much of the work is built on something equally or even more substantial: the lessons of generations of family and community practitioners.

By providing the encouragement and resources to help individuals earn money from their work, you can create the next generation of entrepreneurs supplementing incomes and even creating jobs in your community. Showcase the work downtown in a cooperative gallery, a farmers' market-style street fair, or in the storefronts of service businesses to further the identity of the community as a creative place and add retail offerings.

### Connecting entrepreneurs to resources

There's a great deal that Main Street organizations, their economic restructuring committees and other downtown improvement organizations can do to support the development of entrepreneurship in their communities.

In addition to being a one-stop introduction to information on starting a business downtown, you can also work to connect emerging entrepreneurs to training, technical assistance and capital. Arrange for the Entrepreneur Express to do a special downtown session in your town. You can host workshops introducing local business and micro-enterprise development specialists. If there is a regional economic strategy in place, help business owners see how they might play a part in it.

Reach out to those who might have a marketable product. They may not want to create their own retail operation, but you might connect them to local retailers interested in selling locally made goods. Demonstrating that someone is invested in the success of the community's entrepreneurs can help to build momentum, and it's completely reasonable to think that Main Street might be the convening point that recreates the commercial district as a true regional marketplace.

In addition to the Entrepreneur Express, there are many other resources available to support emerging entrepreneurs. Specifically, micro-enterprise development organizations throughout Virginia can provide resources and access to capital specifically tailored for non-traditional entrepreneurs who might otherwise have trouble getting a loan. These loans are for efforts needing less than \$35,000 in capital and employing fewer than five people. More information on the Virginia Enterprise Initiative is available at [www.dhcd.virginia.gov/VEI](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/VEI).

## 9. Serve a region

Your downtown serves more than just the immediate community. People drive in from the surrounding area to do certain things. They might even cross county and state lines, coming to your downtown from a larger region. What are they coming to town for?

Build on that regional market by thinking of your downtown as a regional resource for specific activities. It might just be one thing, but that's all you need to create a niche, and sometimes: the more specific, the better. An active music hall, a reputation as place for storytelling, or a popular annual event might be expanded to infuse daily life with that well-defined spirit and brand.

Abingdon has long been an entry point for exploring Southwest Virginia, and with the development of Heartwood: Southwest Virginia's Artisan Gateway, the community is poised to engage visitors with collaborative regional view that highlights the best from throughout the region and encourages visitors to go deeper in their own discoveries of the unique culture, musical heritage, and traditions of craft.

In the Shenandoah Valley, Staunton's cultural offerings, such as Blackfriars Playhouse and the Frontier Culture Museum have positioned it as a regional cultural hub, telling both the historical tale of regional settlement and offering guests amenities worthy of a larger urban area.

The 19 counties of Southwest Virginia are engaged in a collaborative regional effort to share their unique culture and heritage. By working together in establishing artisan and heritage music trails, the communities of 'Round the Mountain and The Crooked Road are creating the critical mass of venues, sights, and tourism experiences that will capture a national and international audience. For more information, visit [www.roundthemountain.org](http://www.roundthemountain.org), [www.heartwoodvirginia.org](http://www.heartwoodvirginia.org), and [www.thecrookedroad.org](http://www.thecrookedroad.org).

## 10. Measure outcomes

Experiment with cultural assets and venues, and measure the impacts of your investments on local businesses. Use coupons or administer surveys to identify what investments in events, festivals, and magnet institutions return. If events bring guests in overnight, partner with hotels to identify how much additional tax revenue is generated. Whatever the initiative your district undertakes to drive the retail dollar, build in a measurement system from the start.

Take The Crooked Road: the music heritage trail is, at heart, a community development effort created to boost local economies through the celebration of unique culture. But to justify continued investment in the strategy, communities and additional funders need data. 2008's economic impact study of the project gave them just that. The professional study, available at [www.thecrookedroad.org](http://www.thecrookedroad.org) estimated The Crooked Road's total economic impact to the region at \$23 million per year, creating more than 445 full-time equivalent jobs.

## +1 (Bonus tip: have fun)

One of the best aspects of using arts and cultural investments to improve your local economy is that, at heart, it's broadly participative entertainment. As a host, downtown collectively works to encourage visitors, shoppers, and residents to have a good time. That's a great goal, and the job itself should be fun. If merchants and residents are having fun, the spirit will be contagious—good customer service naturally flows, residents feel attached to the neighborhood, guests feel cared for, and when visitors are actively engaged by your community, they'll spend money, and return—with friends.

### Online arts-and-culture resources for downtown revitalization

[Americans for the Arts' Institute for Community Development and the Arts](#)

[Appalachian Regional Commission's Entrepreneurship Initiative](#)

[Artisans Center of Virginia](#)

[Building Arts and Cultural Districts](#)

[Entrepreneur Express](#)

[National Trust for Historic Preservation on Heritage Tourism](#)

[Public Art Network of Virginia](#)

['Round the Mountain](#)

[Virginia Commission for the Arts](#)

[Virginia Enterprise Initiative](#)

[Virginians for the Arts](#)

# Virginia Main Street



## VIRGINIA DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

*Partners for Better Communities*

[www.dhcd.virginia.gov](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov)



The Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development's Main Street Program provides downtown revitalization technical assistance to Virginia communities, using the National Main Street Center's Four Point Approach™ (Organization, Promotion, Design & Economic Restructuring) to comprehensive preservation-based revitalization of historic commercial districts.

### Web site

[www.dhcd.virginia.gov/MainStreet/](http://www.dhcd.virginia.gov/MainStreet/)

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